

Title: Unconventional Harry

Rating: PG, Death is mentioned, Action/Humor

Summary: When his name comes out of the Goblet of Fire, Harry decides to stop "rolling over" and "just taking it." He has "Marauder godfathers" and decides to have them help him strike back. A one-shot. (H/G eventually)

A/N: This story is dedicated to Bobmin, as the inspiration came from one of his reviews to my story "The Accidental Bond". Yes, Harry is slightly OoC, but he's a lot more fun this way. :) I'd also like to give an enthusiastic thanks to my beta editor: Wolfs_Scream! Paragraphs ending with a "*" are quoted from GoF by JKR.

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Unconventional Harry

Harry was in shock. He wasn't sure why he should be so surprised that his name came out of the Goblet of Fire. It was Halloween, and something bad invariably happened to him on this day.

He felt Hermione push him out of his seat and towards the Headmaster. He woodenly walked forward; the silence was deafening as people stared at him. Based on their expressions, there was no doubt in his mind that they thought he had cheated to get his name included.

Standing in the Trophy Room with the others, he ignored their questions on why he was there. Then all the adults entered the room, including McGonagall, Moody, and Snape. He had no idea why Snape had included himself in this, as he was neither part of the tournament nor his Head of House. To be fair, that applied to Moody as well, but at least Moody was an ex-Auror.

"Harry, did you enter your name?" Dumbledore asked intently.

"No."

"Did you ask anyone else like an older student to enter your name?"

"No. I don't want to be in this," Harry said a little louder and more forcefully.

Snape snorted his disbelief, which fueled Harry's anger more. "Potter is famous for flaunting and breaking the rules."

"Severus..." Dumbledore reprimanded the Potions Master with a firm tone.

Harry only half listened as the adults argued over his being there and the fairness to the other two schools. He was getting more and more fed up with it all until Moody's comment captured his attention.

"Maybe someone's hoping Potter is going to die in it," said Moody, with the merest trace of a growl.

Before anyone could argue more, Harry asked quickly, "Why do I have to compete? What forces me to?"

"We must follow the rules, and the rules state clearly that those people whose names come out of the Goblet of Fire are bound to compete in the tournament.*" Barty Crouch stepped forward from his place in the half-shadows of the room. "If you do not compete in the tasks, Mr Potter, then it will be your magic versus the magic in the Goblet of Fire - which is a very powerful artifact. It will find you in contempt of the Tournament and attempt to pull your magic into it, as has happened twice before - successfully. That is why you must compete."

The quiet yet forceful explanation made the whole scene just that much more eerie to Harry. He stumbled a step back and leaned against a trophy case, breathing a little harder.

Indignation of having to do this coursed through him. Time and time again over the years at Hogwarts he had been forced to do things, dangerous things, against his will. Of course, to be honest with himself, he had taken a few things upon himself stupidly. His curiosity to solve mysteries, along with Hermione's curiosity to learn, was a dangerous combination; Ron's gung-ho desire to be included didn't help matters. They got into trouble as a team.

Crouch's voice brought him out of his thoughts.

"The first task is designed to test your daring," he told Harry, Cedric, Fleur, and Viktor, "so we are not going to be telling you what it is.

Courage in the face of the unknown is an important quality in a wizard ... very important...*

"The first task will take place on November the twenty-fourth, in front of the other students and the panel of judges.*

"The champions are not permitted to ask for or accept help of any kind from their teachers to complete the tasks in the tournament. The champions will face the first challenge armed only with their wands. They will receive information about the second task when the first is over. Owing to the demanding and time-consuming nature of the tournament, the champions are exempted from end-of-year tests."*

As they were dismissed, Harry decided he wanted - no needed - to know exactly what was required. "Mr Crouch, do you have a copy of the rules on you?"

"Yes I do, young man." Crouch pulled them out of an inside pocket, holding them up.

Harry stepped forward and deftly pulled the rolled up parchment from the man's hand. "Thank you, sir. I'll return this to you soon." Leaving a surprised judge behind, Harry turned and left, walking back to the Gryffindor tower by himself.

He didn't know what was different about this situation, but it felt different to him. Maybe it was because of the vision from Voldemort he'd had during the summer, but he didn't think so. This was more like last year when the Dementors were forced upon him. Yes, it was the fact that he was being forced into the Tournament. If he did something stupid himself like trying to rescue a Philosopher's Stone that was "safe," that was one thing; but this was another, he fumed.

Reaching the Portrait to his common room, he heard the loud voices of his house. That was the last straw, causing his temper to snap. It seemed like bad things happened to him and he was expected to take it and deal with it on his own at worst, and with his two closest friends at best. Take it and deal with it? No more! He would no longer roll over and be a wimp.

"Well?" the fat lady in the portrait asked.

Harry gave the password and marched into the common room, the noise almost deafening. He almost made it to the stairs to his dorm before the Weasley twins spotted him.

"Harry!" they cried out together, drawing everyone's attention and cheers.

He had no option but to stop, if only for a moment.

"How did you do it, Harry?"

"Yeah, tell us!"

Harry ignored the questions shouted at him but raised his hands up so they would quiet down. "I didn't enter my name in the Goblet of Fire, but I'm being forced to compete."

"Sure you didn't!" someone shouted sarcastically, drawing laughs.

"Are you being an idiot, like two years ago?" he called out angrily, causing a gasp and a few unkind sounding murmurs.

Turning, he saw Ginny right behind him and she was turning pale. Realizing he had reminded her of the awful time of her first year, he stepped forward to put his mouth near her ear. "Sorry, I'm not trying to hurt you with this," he whispered to her.

She slowly nodded in understanding.

Pulling back and raising his voice again, he said, "Two years ago people accused me of being the Heir of Slytherin based on the flimsiest of evidence and everyone who said that was wrong then. If you think I entered my name in this Tournament, I'll tell you now that you're wrong. I'll compete because I have to, but that's it."

He turned and raced up the stairs before anyone could say anything back to him. "Freakin' idiots!" he swore under his breath as he entered his dorm room and slammed the door.

As he made it to his bed, movement caught his eye and he saw Ron lying on his bed, still fully dressed.

"Congratulations," Ron said with a smile that wasn't quite a smile.

"What do you mean? I didn't enter myself," Harry protested.

"But you must have done something. Did you use your Invisibility Cloak or have an older student enter your name?" Ron asked, a little less friendly now.

"I tell you, just like I told the judges. I - didn't - enter - myself. I think someone is trying to kill me." When Ron's look turned even more doubtful, Harry lost it. "I thought you'd be with me, that you'd be my friend."

"A real friend would have helped his friend enter his name too," Ron practically spat back. "I know you found a way. I'm not stupid."

"Well, you're doing a really good impression of stupid right now," Harry fired back.

"Oh, yeah, well I can't wait to see how stupid you look when you can't keep up with the other seventh years. Good luck!" he ended sarcastically and turned his back on Harry.

"You can keep your luck. I won't need it or your help," Harry shot back and walked out of the dorm room and into the bathroom.

After using the toilet and returning to bed, he grabbed writing materials and closed the curtains around his bed. He knew he needed help and with Ron out of the picture, he really only had three people to turn to. He wrote to two of them now. He had a plan and hoped they could get him what he wanted. Of course, they could have a better plan.

The next few days were a trial. He received the usual stares and murmurs when he passed people, as in previous years when everyone thought he'd done something wrong. He mostly ignored it.

Hermione was there for him as a friend and he appreciated her for it. Therefore, when Potions class rolled around and he and Malfoy got into a small spell fight in the corridor, with their spells colliding and ricocheting to hit Goyle and Hermione, Harry willingly skived off class to escort her to the infirmary.

"You're going to be all right," he told her as calmly as he could. He was carrying her book bag as well as his, causing his shoulder to protest despite the Feather-Weight charms on each bag.

In the infirmary, he pulled her to a chair. "Sit here for a minute," he told her as he hurried off to get the nurse from her office. Her teeth were still growing from Malfoy's spell and now reached the top of her chest.

"Madam Pomfrey! Hermione needs your help!" he shouted as he ran for her office.

She bustled out as he got there.

"What's wrong, Potter?" she asked as she pulled her wand and hurried over.

"Malfoy did some spell that hit her and her teeth started to grow ... and they won't stop," he explained as Hermione couldn't really talk at the moment.

"Yes, I see. That's simple enough to fix. You can run along," she told him as she started to work on his friend.

"I'll, uh, I'll wait if you don't mind. I want to make sure she's fine."

Pomfrey did a spell and Hermione's teeth started to slowly shrink. "Do you doubt my ability, Potter?" She summoned a small hand mirror from a shelf.

"Oh, no, not at all," he assured her hurriedly. "I just, well, it'd make me feel better to know that my best friend is all right again."

"That is good to know, considering how much I have to help you," she said kindly, almost teasingly. She held the mirror in front of Hermione. "Granger, tell me just before they are their proper size again and I'll stop the shrinking."

Hermione nodded, her teeth now only down to the bottom of her chin.

Goyle lumbered into the infirmary, not having been in as much hurry to get there, or else he'd been held back for some reason, Harry thought.

Pomfrey noticed him come in and pointed to a bed. "Over there, Goyle, and I'll get to you in a moment."

"Now," Hermione said and Pomfrey stopped the spell.

"How is that? I can adjust is a little either way."

Hermione carefully looked at her teeth and smiled. "I think they're where they need to be. Thank you, Madam Pomfrey."

"You're welcome, dear. Do be careful in the future. Now, whose class are you missing?"

"Professor Snape. We're both missing his class." Hermione gave Harry a slight glare, but she couldn't hold it for long.

"Right, I'll be sure and send a note for both of you. Run along now." Pomfrey moved over to where Goyle was and began to work on the boils that had sprouted all over him.

"Come on, Harry. We can finish the period in the library studying the Potion we should have made today." She grabbed her bag from him and led him out, but did not walk as quickly as she usually did.

"Thank you for coming with me, Harry," she told him very sincerely when they were alone in the corridor. "I'm sure I could have done it on my own, but it was easier not having to talk when I was ... that way."

"I'm sure you'd have done the same for me." He gave her his best smile and saw her blush a little and nod. "I do appreciate the way you've believed me about the Tournament."

"It's been horrid the way people have been treating you. I suppose the Hufflepuffs have a reason to want to snub you, but surely they understand it wasn't your fault."

She gave him such a sincere look of trust he couldn't help but smile. "If only each of them was as good a friend as you."

Her bright look faltered. "Harry, Ron is still your friend too. He only needs a little time to come to his senses."

He couldn't stop the snort that came out. "I don't think he has any senses right now."

Whatever reply Hermione might have made was stopped as Colin Creevey came running up to them.

"There you are, Harry," Colin said, taking big breaths. "Professor Dumbledore told me to find you and bring you to the Wand Weighing, but you weren't in class. You have to follow me now."

Harry shrugged as he told Hermione, "I'll see you at lunch then."

"All right," she told him as she continued on to the library.

When Harry arrived, everyone was waiting on him. After the wand weighing, pictures were taken and Harry had to work hard to stay in group shots and avoid being singled out. The reporter, some witch named Skeeter, tried to get him alone for an interview, but he managed to escape her clutches and leave for lunch.

It was three weeks until the first task and Harry wanted the whole Tournament to be over now.

The weekend before the first task was a Hogsmeade weekend. Harry went with Hermione and Neville. According to Hermione, Ron had said some very unflattering things about Harry and she was offended. It was hard, but Harry didn't say anything bad about Ron so Hermione would hang around him if she wanted to. He truly appreciated her friendship, as well as knew he'd probably need her help with the Tournament later.

While they were sitting in The Three Broomsticks enjoying lunch away from school, Harry saw one of his supporters walk in the door, spot him, and come over. He couldn't stop the grin.

"Professor Lupin!" Hermione was surprised to see him.

"Miss Granger, I'm no longer your professor. As I've told Harry, Remus will do." Lupin turned to Neville. "Mr Longbottom." He

received a nod for his greeting. Finally, he gave a big smile and warm greeting to the last. "Harry, you're looking very good, despite the difficulty you find yourself in."

"Thanks, Remus. How's my godfather?"

"Doing about as well as can be expected for someone confined to a house," he replied with a hint of sadness.

Harry eyed the shoe-box sized package under the man's arm. "Err, is that for me, I hope?"

"Oh this?" Lupin faked surprise. "Why, I suppose it is." He set the box down in front of Harry. "I believe everything you asked your godfather for is in there, along with a few notes and some instructions." His expression became serious. "You need to be very careful with all of that, Harry. Not only was it hard to get, but well, you could hurt someone with it."

"I understand and I will," Harry said solemnly.

"Uh, Harry, what do you have?" Hermione said with great curiosity.

"Oh, just a few things to help me with the first task," Harry said as he put the box in his lap and mostly out of sight.

"But I thought you said you couldn't receive help?" Neville asked.

"I can't receive help from the teachers," Harry corrected him. "This is just a few small things to help bring me up to the level of the seventh years."

Hermione harrumphed. "I'm not sure that's the whole truth."

"I, uh, I think it's best if I don't say," Harry said, looking a little shifty.

"Then it's obviously not the whole truth," she said as she glared at him.

"Miss Granger, please let Harry be. He is at a disadvantage and this solution is approved by his godfather and myself," he told her with a straight face, which amazed Harry knowing what should be in the box.

She pulled back her verbal claws and more meekly said, "All right."

Harry shared a brief grin privately with Neville before he cleared his expression. "Oh, and the other matter I asked about?" he asked his father's friend.

"It's taken care of and you'll find the schedule in the package," Lupin said innocently. "Now, I must be off. I'd like to come see you compete, but I'm not sure if I'll be up to it or not. I may be a bit tired. So I'll bid you good luck now, Harry."

"Thanks, Remus!"

When it was just the three of them again, Hermione turned on him. "Harry, are you going to tell me what's in the box?"

"Don't worry, Hermione. It's only a few things from the Muggle world to give me a leg up."

"Do you need help practicing or anything?" she asked with not a small amount of worry.

Harry gave her his best smile and squeezed her shoulder. "Thank you, but I think that all I have to do is a little reading, a few minutes of practicing, and it'll all work out. I'll be prepared for whatever they throw at me. You'll see," he told her confidently. Neville bought the confident act, but he wasn't so sure Hermione did.

He'd read the letters and notes tonight in the safety of his bed, away from curious eyes.

Harry had his curtains closed and stuck together, plus silencing charms on his bed. He was glad he'd done that when he started to read the first letter.

"Dragons! I have to face a dragon! Holy Merlin..."

He was glad he had asked for this stuff now. He read through the instructions and it all sounded pretty simple. He'd sneak out into the Forbidden Forest tomorrow afternoon for a few minutes to try the things out. He needed to be sure he understood how they worked so no one got hurt.

At six in the morning on the twenty-fourth, Harry carefully let two dozen short individuals in hooded cloaks into the school via the door to the kitchens. Using Dobby as a liaison, Harry had arranged this with the elves so they wouldn't tell the Headmaster, after he had solemnly sworn no one would be hurt. They all hurried to the second floor, where Harry was glad Moaning Myrtle was not present. He opened both doors to the Chamber of Secrets, letting his guests take care of making an opening in the rocks with their own magic.

He was pleased to see that the basilisk had not rotted, as were his guests. Leaving them to their task, he flew his broom back up and locked the door to the bathroom to keep the other students out. Not that he expected anyone to try to go in there for the next four hours, but better safe than sorry.

That task done, he headed back to his dorm room for another couple hours of rest before going to breakfast.

Harry stood in the tent at ten in the morning, waiting to start the first task. The Skeeter woman was back, but Dumbledore ran her off, much to everyone's relief.

Hermione also showed up at the last second. She pulled him to the side. "Are you sure you're going to be all right? They've got ... dragons outside for you," she whispered excitedly as if unable to believe what she'd seen with her own eyes.

Harry was glad he hadn't told her beforehand that he knew what was coming. "It'll be fine, Hermione."

"You say 'fine' about everything, Harry!" she shot back in her fierce whisper, her worry plainly evident.

He sighed. "Look, it's just like the other eight times you've asked me over the last three weeks. I've got a plan that should work for almost anything they throw at me, and now that you tell me about the dragons, I'm not worried about them either. My plan can deal with them."

"But..."

Crouch and Bagman entered the tent and Hermione had to leave. Harry listened closely as Bagman explained about the task. One part particularly caught his attention.

"Well, now we're all here - time to fill you in!" said Bagman brightly. "When the audience has assembled, I'm going to be offering each of you this bag" - he held up a small sack of purple silk and shook it at them - "from which you will each select a small model of the thing you are about to face! There are different - err - varieties, you see. And I have to tell you something else too ... ah, yes ... your task is to collect the golden egg!"*

As luck would have it, Harry would go last. He noted that none of the other champions seemed surprised at the task. Crouch did a quick charm on each of them to make sure their wand was the only magical item on them, as per the written rules. Once they were alone, he smirked at the thought of what else he had with him and made himself comfortable while he waited.

When it was his turn, Harry confidently walked into the arena. Well, he did his best to look confident, even if he was a little nervous. It would be so easy for things to go wrong. Just before he started, he noticed that Lupin was there and a big black dog was with his former teacher. Feeling better because of having back up, he drew his wand and pulled out his Quidditch goggles as Bagman told him to start.

The Hungarian Horntail dragon eyed him warily and let out a small belch of fire as a warning. Damn! The dragon looked big. Reaching into an inner pocket, he pulled out his first small "toy" in his left hand and hoped it did the job. If not, well, he had a few more "toys".

The arena was littered with rocks and a few large logs - at least one already had burn marks on it. Harry assumed they were for cover and as source material for transfiguration. He used them for cover and moved around the edge of the arena, making sure the dragon could see where he was. After all, he was trying to maneuver the dragon to a specific place. It would not do to have the crowd behind the dragon.

Several times the dragon belched long streams of fire at him, causing him to scurry behind a rock. Briefly during these times,

Harry heard the crowd, but he otherwise ignored them and concentrated on the dragon.

There, it had taken at least ten minutes, but he had made his way around the arena and the dragon had moved very little. There was no one behind the dragon now, only forest.

Harry took a deep breath and summoned his courage before he fully popped up from behind the rock. The dragon took that as a challenge and blew out a full breath of fire. Harry dropped behind the rock again and canceled the shrinking spell on his "toy", causing it to expand into a full-sized shoulder-mounted rocket launcher.

As soon as the fire disappeared from around the rock, Harry popped up again and aimed directly at the head of the dragon. The dragon obligingly opened its mouth to let out a second belch of fire and Harry froze all movement except for his trigger finger. The small rocket leapt out of the tube and streaked away for the dragon's head. More good luck, the dragon saw the rocket and moved its head slightly to try and eat the "thing" coming toward it.

When the rocket hit the back of the dragon's mouth, the animal's mouth was mostly closed as it had started to snap shut. The explosion boomed throughout the arena. Fire came out the front of the mouth, the ears, and the eyes before the head disappeared as burnt meat, fire, and smoke. The now headless dragon fell over with a mighty whomping sound, easily heard in the now quiet arena.

"Damn! That was bloody spectacular!" Harry shouted to himself as he walked over to the nest, shrinking the rocket launcher back down, and putting it into a pocket. In his test, the rocket had taken out a medium-sized tree trunk, but to destroy the entire head of the dragon, well, damn!

He picked up the golden egg, cast a Sonorus on himself, and asked, "Do I get my score now or what?"

The murmurs started up from the students, along with much pointing at both him and the dragon.

"You can't do that!" Bagman shouted. "You killed the dragon!"

"Well, yeah. I thought that was the point. If it was trying to kill me, it gets the same treatment back," Harry argued, setting the egg down as he expected a long conversation about his unconventional tactic. "Besides, you said the task was to collect the golden egg. You never said anything about not killing the dragon. I did listen for that."

Bagman sputtered and turned to his fellow judges, obviously at a loss for words.

"What was that thing you used?" Crouched asked with a magically loud voice, not sounding overly happy either.

"That was a shoulder-mounted rocket launcher. It's not magical in any way. You've never seen one before because it comes from the Muggle world." He was glad he had watched the war movies with Dudley on the telly, about the only thing they had done together in a semi-friendly way. Well, that and the police shows.

"But..." Crouch seemed to be at a loss for words too.

"The rules I received from you say nothing about not being able to use Muggle things. They only say that I can't bring any magical items other than my wand. Oh, and they also say you can't change the rules during the Tournament too," he reminded them. Harry was amused to note that the three Headmasters were not arguing, although Dumbledore was giving him a very disappointed look, not that Harry cared after being told he had to be in the Tournament and essentially to "deal with it".

The judges circled for a moment and then started to drawing fiery numbers in the air. Harry received straight ones, putting him solidly in last place with five points. He was almost proud of that, and he was sure his two family friends would be too. He could see Lupin having to struggle to hold laughter in, and the dog was nowhere to be seen, so he assumed Padfoot was lying down and laughing.

"What are supposed to do about the dead dragon?" a man to side shouted.

Harry looked over and realized he was one of the dragon handlers, probably the manager. Charlie Weasley was there too and was giving Harry an evil glare. "About the dragon carcass... I, Harry Potter, do claim the dragon carcass by right of trial by combat under

the Magical Creature decree of 1636." He was thankful he had read everything Remus had given him, although he suspected he'd get an earful about it all from Hermione about how he knew it.

"What?" the dragon handler manager shouted.

"The Magical Creature decree of 1636," Harry repeated. "It's the one that says the victor of a trial by combat with a class five magical creature gets to keep the loser. That does imply that if I'd lost, the dragon would be within its rights to eat what was left of me."

Harry had been wondering where his "help" was, but they finally came into the arena. By the looks on the faces of the dozen goblins, it appeared they had been delayed and had to force their way in. "Excellent, here's the crew I hired in the case that I won." He smirked, which drew more angry looks from the dragon handlers.

"Harry, I'm afraid that decree does not apply to you, as the dragon was not found in the wild. Moreover, it was controlled by another party, which we contracted," Dumbledore said, his voice now amplified.

With a forced calm, Harry pulled out a parchment and looked it over as the goblins looked the dragon over in preparation to work. "I'm sorry, Headmaster, but I don't see any restrictions in the decree and I'm not aware of any decrees after this was written which change the conditions. The decree says that that each of us must be able to kill the other, and that was true; and that the combat happen on soil controlled by the British Ministry of Magic, also true." He looked up at the judges, repressing his grin to only a small curve as he held the parchment out. "You can read it if you like."

Dumbledore pulled out his wand and summoned the parchment from Harry. The Headmaster, Crouch, and Bagman all looked at a copy of the short decree. None looked happy when they faced him again.

"Since we are discussing this decree," Harry garnered the attention of everyone in the stands again, "I, Harry Potter, do claim the basilisk that I slew two years ago by right of trial by combat under the Magical Creature decree of 1636." He made sure he looked for Snape and saw the man's expression harden, just as Sirius had

predicted. Sirius had been sure the loss of such precious potions materials would be a blow to the greasy git.

Dumbledore gave him a stunned look, as if the idea of harvesting the huge basilisk carcass hadn't occurred to him. The old man cleared his throat. "When did you plan to retrieve it, Harry?"

Harry looked over at the goblins and got a wave. Looking back at Dumbledore, he said, "It's already been done, Professor."

With his business done and no more arguments at the moment, Harry picked up his golden egg and left quickly before someone found something else to bring up. It wasn't until he was out of the arena that he realized no one had cheered when he finished. Oh well... He started walking back to the castle, mentally bracing himself for his conversation with Hermione.

Harry was doing his best not to snap back at Hermione as she continued her haranguing about his killing the dragon for the eighth minute, but she was starting to repeat herself so he decided to jump in.

"Hermione!" he shouted, causing her to pause, still red-faced in her anger. "I know you're smarter than me, but what would you have done in my place? How would you have retrieved the egg of the dragon when you only found out about it ten minutes before the task started? Ignoring what you know from this morning from watching the other contestants, what would you have done?"

Slowly, she lost her intent and angry look and bowed her head eventually. "I don't know," she said softly and meekly.

He put a hand gently on her shoulder, causing her to look up at him. "And that's why I tried to prepare myself to handle any dangerous thing they threw at me. I did do some research, Hermione. Almost without fail, the first task involves facing a dangerous creature. Which also happens about half the time in the third task as well."

"But you killed it," she all but whined as if in pain.

"It was trying to kill me, either by roasting or by eating!" He pulled his hand back and ran his fingers through his hair. "Try looking at it this way. The adults knew what they were putting us against and they

also knew magic can be lethal. If you want to blame someone, try blaming those in charge of the Tournament for putting the dragons in danger." He watched her think that through until she finally nodded.

"You do have a point, Harry. The adults should have known better than to subject those poor creatures to such danger." She shook her head slowly in pity.

It was all he could do not to make a face. She was "going Hagrid" on him. Next she'd say how misunderstood dragons were.

"If it helps, and I'm not saying this just because you're upset, but I really am sorry I had to kill the dragon. They are majestic. I'll also try not to hurt any other animals in the other tasks unless I have to. All right?" He watched her search his face and then smile slightly.

"Thank you, Harry."

He was glad they were in an unused classroom at the moment, because things might turn loud again. However, he felt this was the best thing to do.

"About the second task, would you like to help me with the egg to figure out the clue?" he asked hopefully with his best charming grin. "The sooner I find out, the better I can prepare and make sure no one gets hurt."

She gave him a calculating look, as if determining if it was fair for her to do so.

"Remember, I only can't get help from the teachers. I'll give you an incentive too," he said, his smile growing. "Let's say I have a bag of one hundred Galleons and I'll give that to you if you can solve the clue."

"One hundred Galleons!" Her eyes widened.

He could guess what she was calculating behind that look of glee. "Yes, one hundred Galleons if you can solve it in the next twenty-four hours. For every day you take beyond that, I'll subtract one Galleon. So, if you solve it quickly, that means you could buy, oh, seventy-five or so average books. And for every extra day you take,

you lose about a book." He watched her think it through carefully. "It probably won't be that hard for someone as smart as you, so it's a win for you and a win for me. What do you say?"

After several long seconds, she grabbed the golden egg from his hand and shoved it in her book bag. "Every day from this time on?"

"Sure. Noon starts a new day," he agreed with a large grin. "So, let's go have lunch so we have lots of energy for the afternoon."

Hermione smiled at him, much happier now than when they had entered the room. Or at least she was sufficiently placated, he thought.

The next morning, Harry waited in the common room for Hermione to come down so he could walk her to breakfast. He was curious as to how her work was going.

She had spent all of her extra time yesterday afternoon working on the screaming egg, as well as most of the evening. She could do that only because she was at least a week ahead on all of her homework, and further ahead for some classes.

A very tired looking Parvati and Lavender came down the stairs. Harry raised an eyebrow at them when they looked his way.

"Did you really have to give her that challenge, Harry?" Parvati asked in a tired voice.

Lavender looked like she hadn't slept much either. "Please make her stop, Harry. She had it with her everywhere, even in the bathroom! I swear I barely slept at all last night."

"I'll talk to her," he promised, surprised she hadn't used silencing charms. Perhaps she felt that would change her experiments, or at least that was the only explanation he could come up with.

"Thank you," Lavender told him as they both trudged off to breakfast.

A few minutes later, Hermione lumbered down the stairs with bags under her eyes and the egg under her arm.

He rose quickly and hurried over to her. "Hermione..."

She handed the egg back to him and a piece of parchment. "You can put that in your trunk and we can go eat. You can pay me later."

Harry was impressed she had already solved it. "Err, OK." While he walked up to his dorm, he looked at the parchment.

"Come seek us where our voices sound,
We cannot sing above the ground,
And while you're searching, ponder this:
We've taken what you'll sorely miss,
An hour long you'll have to look,
And to recover what we took,
But past an hour- the prospect's black,
Too late, it's gone, it won't come back."*

When he came back down, he found Hermione sitting in a chair and almost asleep.

"Hey, come on." He helped her to her feet. "Do I need to get you some Pepperup potion?" When she stumbled going through the portrait hole, he told her, "Never mind, I know the answer."

He took to the hospital wing first. Madam Pomfrey clicked her tongue and shook her head, but she also gave Hermione the potion.

Walking to the Great Hall, Harry looked at Hermione thoughtfully.

"What?" she asked.

"I was just thinking. The clue mentioned taking something from me that I'll sorely miss, but I can't think of anything that I couldn't hide in my vault to protect. What do you suppose they'll take?"

"That did cross my mind," she admitted after a moment. "If it's not a thing, then it can only be a person." She looked at Harry carefully.

He got her message. "You would be the obvious choice."

She nodded. "Normally, I'd say it would be Ron, but as things are now, I'm probably the obvious choice - as you say."

Harry mentally chewed on that while they continued to walk slowly. "You do know that your participation would be voluntary, right?"

"You mean I should tell them no?" She sounded flabbergasted, as if that idea was forbidden.

"I mean exactly that." When he saw her take a big breath, he hurried on to stop her. "Wait! I know it's your choice and I'm not telling you that you can't participate. However, I would ask you not to, for my peace of mind. I don't want to see my best friend get hurt - even accidentally."

Hermione exhaled in a big sigh as she considered his words. "Thank you for leaving it up to me. I will consider what you've said - carefully."

"Thanks, Hermione," he said with a grin.

While she wasn't her normal active self, Hermione made it through all of her classes, and had a bag of gold when she went to sleep - earlier than normal that night.

Harry straightened his tie and looked at himself in the mirror. His dress robes for the Yule Ball looked quite good he thought. Too bad this time was mostly a waste from his point of view.

He left his dorm room and went to the common room. There he saw Neville greet Ginny as she came down the stairs. He nodded to his dorm mate, having seen him only a few minutes before, and looked appreciatively at Ron's little sister. For the first time, he realized that Ginny was turning into a young woman.

"Miss Weasley, you look extra lovely this evening," he said as he gave her an abbreviated bow. When he looked back up, she was blushing furiously, which he thoroughly enjoyed - a successful tease.

"T-thank you, Harry. You look very smartly dressed," she returned, her blush still quite deep. "Are you about to go pick up your mystery date you won't tell anyone about?"

"I am. I'll see you two later ... have fun." He clapped Neville on the shoulder and quickly strode out of the common room.

He made his way through the castle, taking secret passages and hiding as best he could. He would have used his Invisibility Coat, but that would have been hard to hide inside what he was wearing. Double checking that no one was looking, he ducked into the kitchens. "Dobby?"

The elf popped in. "Master Harry Potter Sir! What can Dobby be doing for you?"

Harry knelt down on one knee. "Dobby, could you do a couple of things for me? Both are pretty easy."

"I'd be happy to help, Harry Potter Sir!"

"Thanks, Dobby. I knew I could count on you. The first thing is that I left a bag on my bed. Can you go get it and bring it here?"

"Certainly!" Dobby popped out and back before Harry could count to three, holding the black bag.

"You're very fast," Harry praised him, making the elf blush with delight. Harry opened the bag and pulled out four letters. "Now for the second thing. I need you to wait ten minutes and then deliver these four letters. All of the people should be in the Entrance Hall then."

"Dobby will be happy to help!" he said, practically bouncing as he took the letters.

"Oh, you can read the names, right?" Harry asked as he pulled out his Invisibility Cloak and broom before zipping up his bag.

"Yes, Harry Potter Sir. Dobby can read."

"Brilliant. Thanks again for your help."

"Bye Harry Potter Sir. Come visit Dobby any time."

"I will visit again, Dobby." He thought it might be fun to have a late night snack with the elf sometime.

Harry donned his Cloak and left the kitchens through the back door. There, he mounted his broom and flew slowly towards Hogsmeade.

Hermione was looking around for Harry. He should have been here by now. Her date, Viktor Krum, and the other champions didn't seem concerned about his non-appearance. However, based on her expression, Professor McGonagall was very concerned.

A popping sound was heard and Hermione spun to see a house elf. "Dobby?"

"Yes, it is Dobby, Mistress Grangy. Sorry, but I have no letter for you." Dobby did reach up and hand a letter to Viktor, who took it slowly and with a measure of distrust. The elf also gave one each to Fleur and Cedric before turning and giving his last letter to Professor McGonagall. His errand complete, he popped away before anything else could be said or asked.

"That's Harry's writing!" she exclaimed when she saw Victor's name on the envelope. He opened it and held it in front of both of them, knowing Harry was her friend, or so Hermione assumed.

Viktor,

I hope you have a good evening tonight, as this Ball should honor the real champions. Therefore, I will not be attending. I'm sure this will put some of the spotlight on me anyway, but I hope most of the focus will be on you and the other two real champions.

Harry Potter

p.s. Please be good to Hermione, she's my best friend.

"That's very decent of Potter," Cedric Diggory said as he put his letter into an inside pocket.

Hermione noticed that Fleur was smiling appreciatively too, just like Viktor. Professor McGonagall, however, looked very angry. "Professor?"

McGonagall looked up. "Did you know anything about Mr Potter skiving the Yule Ball, Miss Granger?"

"No, Professor. Does your letter say where he is?"

"Only that he is someplace safe with his guardian. Excuse me for a moment."

Hermione watched McGonagall storm off, probably to find the Headmaster. "Harry is going to be in so much trouble when he gets back."

Viktor grunted affirmatively. "But `e iss a good person."

Harry stepped out of the Floo and into an antique looking living room. "Sirius!" he exclaimed as he dropped his bag and hurried into the open arms of his godfather.

"It's good to see you, Harry."

"Hello, Harry."

Harry backed up and looked over to see his other family friend. "Remus!" He gave the man a hug too.

When the hugs were over, he looked around. "So this is the Black ancestral home?"

"This is it," Sirius said, holding out his hand to present it. "It's been mostly unoccupied for the last five years, which is how long ago my mother died. Moony and I only have about half of it livable, but it's good enough for now." He gave Harry a big grin. "We've also got your box for the second task ready too. I think you'll like this idea."

Harry grin grew to match the ones on the two Marauders. He hadn't been sure what to do about the second task, so he had only made a few partial suggestions and left making a plan up to the two Marauders.

A ball of flame suddenly appeared in the room, along with a trill.

"Fawkes!" Harry cried, happy to see the immortal bird and happier that it was alone.

"That was sooner than I expected. He must really be pissed off," Sirius said as he walked over to the chair the Phoenix had landed on. He took the letter from the bird's talon and held a prepared one of his own out. "If you would, take this back to the old man."

The bird trilled, took the letter, and left.

Sirius opened the Headmaster's letter. "Yep, he's pissed off." He handed the letter to Harry to read. "Just remember, my permission for you to attend to a family matter trumps his non-school related activity."

"Right," Harry said with a grin as he handed the short letter demanding his immediate return to school to Remus. "So, what do you have for me this time? And where did you get this stuff anyway?"

"All sorts of fun toys, Harry," Remus told him as Sirius led them towards the study.

"And they're not hard to get if you know the right people, not to mention the occasional Compulsion charm and Obliviate charm," Sirius said with a grin.

"Sirius! Please tell me you didn't hurt anyone..."

"Neither of us hurt anyone, I promise. Just a few drinks, a charm or two to make them think we were old friends and should be wherever we were, and then a charm to make them forget the evening."

Remus clapped the boy on the shoulder. "No real harm was done, Harry. We just relieved them of some outdated equipment they were going to get rid of soon anyway. There is one magical item you need that we bought and then modified ourselves, plus one I created just for the task. See? No harm."

"Thanks!" Harry was looking forward to see what their idea was for the second task.

Three days before the start of the spring term, Harry landed his broom in front of the main doors to the school. When he walked in, Professors Dumbledore and McGonagall were standing there waiting for him.

"Mr Potter, please come with us," McGonagall said in a frosty tone that left no room for argument.

Harry walked with them, but also tried to start the conversation now. "Professors, as I followed the school policy of notifying you that I was leaving to attend a family matter over a school holiday, and you were given a note from my guardian, I fail to see what the problem is."

"Mr Potter!"

"Minerva," Dumbledore said calmly, "be patient a few more minutes." That was the end of the conversation during their journey.

In Dumbledore's office, they all took seats. No candies or tea was offered.

"Mr Potter, do you realize what you have done?" McGonagall queried angrily and almost rhetorically.

Relying upon Sirius's prompting, Harry replied, "No Professor, I'm not aware of any school policies that I've broken." He found it curious that Dumbledore was letting McGonagall run the interrogation.

She huffed. "You are making a mockery of your position in the Triwizard Tournament and embarrassing the school."

Sirius's attitudes must be rubbing off on him, because he replied, "The school was already embarrassed and mocked when my name came out of the Goblet of Fire and all the adults forced me to participate. But which school policies do my actions violate?"

McGonagall gave a strangled sound and turned to her superior.

"Harry, that will mean detention with me for all of next week for leaving school grounds without proper authorization," the Headmaster told him.

Harry did his best to hold a calm expression, despite the fact that he was getting angrier. "Headmaster, I must protest. Professor McGonagall was notified with a signed note before I left that I would be with my guardian, just like any other normal Christmas holiday, and you received secondary confirmation directly from my guardian within minutes after I left. Since I followed what students normally do every Christmas holiday, how is it improper authorization?" He,

Sirius, and Remus had planned this carefully. There should have been no problem as Remus knew all the rules from being on staff last year.

"The detentions stand, Harry," Dumbledore said solemnly.

"And I appeal the punishment to the Board of Governors," Harry said just as solemnly.

McGonagall gasped ever so slightly in surprise at his tactic.

Dumbledore closed his eyes for a moment before he looked at Harry. "Do you really feel it must go that far, Harry? Don't you see that I'm doing this because I care for you and to show you what's proper?"

"If you truly cared for me, you'd have prevented my name from coming out of the Goblet of Fire, or you would not have forced me to participate in the Tournament. If you want to show me now that you care, you wouldn't punish me when I've followed the normal procedures for a student who wants to go home over the Christmas holidays," he pointed out, not giving an inch.

The Headmaster stared at him for a moment before he said with disappointment, "The detentions are canceled then. You may leave, Harry."

Harry quickly left, with a smirk forming as he went down the stairs. Sirius and Remus had predicted every argument and answer correctly, just as they predicted that Dumbledore wouldn't want to involve the Board of Governors.

The morning of the second task, Harry went to breakfast with Hermione. "Since you're walking with me, I would guess they didn't ask you to be in today's task?"

"No, they asked me last night in the library," she confirmed, leaving out details of the conversation.

He raised an eyebrow in silent question.

"I decided that if our positions were reversed, I would have made the same request of you that you did of me. Therefore, I declined to participate," she stated matter-of-factly.

"Thank you, Hermione." They walked for a moment more before he asked, "So, do you know who they picked for me?"

"I have no idea. I would suggest we look to see who's missing from breakfast. Since the task starts shortly after, everyone should be in the Great Hall," she pointed out.

"Good idea."

At breakfast, instead of eating in their usual "isolated little world", they looked around and spoke with those sitting around them to see if anyone was missing.

It was Harry who noticed first. "Wait, where's Ginny?"

"Ginny? Why would they pick Ginny for you? I mean, I know she's your friend, but why not Neville or one of your other dorm mates?"

"What's that about me?" Neville asked from two seats away.

"Nothing important," Harry answered. He turned to Hermione and softly asked, "Are Neville and Ginny going out? I haven't seen them together since the Ball, but...?"

"No," she answered in a normal voice. "Ginny did recently start dating Michael Corner in Ravenclaw. They met at the Ball."

"OK." Not that whom Ginny was dating mattered to him, he didn't think. On the other hand, Ron was sitting on the other side of Neville and had apparently heard Hermione. He didn't look pleased. Harry didn't think that was wise of Ron, but that was a matter between brother and sister.

He handed Hermione a small box. "If you would, please hold this up in the air over your head when the task starts. I'll summon it from you."

"Why?" she asked as she examined the plain wooden box with a small latch.

"Because it has something I need that would not pass a magical check," he explained quietly.

"What?" she asked suspiciously.

"A map, a listening device, and what I believe is called a bullhorn. The sound devices have a translation spell on them," he said even quieter.

Her eyes went wide. "You're going to talk to the Merpeople?"

"That's the plan. See, I'm trying not to hurt them." He did his best to keep a straight face because she was going to yell at him later for that partial truth, but he didn't know how else to say what he was going to do that wouldn't make her angry at him.

"Very well, I'll help."

"Thank you."

Far too soon, he was at the bank of the lake with the other champions, with the judges nearby. Bagman came over and did a spell to check for magical items. Harry noticed that Krum had a knife, but he was allowed to keep it. Harry assumed there were no spells on it.

At the end, Bagman gave Harry's shoulder a quick squeeze and returned to the judges' table; he pointed his wand at his throat as he had done at the World Cup, said, "Sonus!" and his voice boomed out across the dark water toward the stands.*

"Well, all our champions are ready for the second task, which will start on my whistle. They have precisely an hour to recover what has been taken from them. On the count of three, then. One ... two ... three!"*

The whistle echoed shrilly in the cold, still air; the stands erupted with cheers and applause.*

While the others jumped into the water, Harry pulled out a very small row boat from a pocket and canceled the shrinking charm on it. While it was growing, he cast "Accio Harry's Box" in Hermione's direction; he caught it a few seconds later and shoved off, jumping into the boat at the last second. He cast wind charms Remus had

taught him to blow the boat across the water towards the center of the lake.

He enlarged the box and pulled out the map. It was a crude version of the Marauder's Map custom made for him by Remus. All it did was show human life forms within about fifty yards, and Remus said that Merpeople were close enough to human to show up. He watched the map until a number of dots started showing up. There were no names attached to the dots, but that was all right. He only needed to know where the village was.

Halting the boat over the village, Harry pulled what looked like a small pebble out of a pocket and resized it. Checking the map again to make sure he wouldn't hit anyone, he pulled a pin on the grenade and tossed it into the water far enough away not to affect him. Three seconds later there was an eruption of water along with a booming sound.

He lowered the end of the bullhorn into the water and shouted, "Bring up my person or I'll drop more booming things." A few fish started floating up to the surface where the explosion was so he added, "And kill more fish."

Dropping the end of what looked like a funny stethoscope into the water, he listened. A minute or so later, he heard a screeching voice. "That was not part of our deal."

Harry shouted back. "I didn't make the deal and I don't care about the deal. Bring up my person or I will kill more fish."

"No! Wait!"

Hoping for the best he said, "I'll wait for a short time, but no tricks." He leaned back and waited. A few minutes later, many heads broke the water surface. Most of them were a Merperson and had a trident or spear end near them, but four heads looked normal. He almost objected, but then all four started to wake up and he knew he'd have to take them all now. Besides, now that he thought about it, how were they to know which person was his? It almost made him laugh.

Pulling out his wand, which made the Merpeople tense, Harry levitated each person into the boat. Ginny, Cho Chang, a little

blonde-haired girl, and a seventh year boy who was probably Krum's best friend.

"Harry?" Ginny called out as she was put into the boat.

"Just a minute..."

He finished rescuing the four and then used the bullhorn one last time as he pulled out another box. "Sorry about the threat, but I had no way of going under water. To make up for this, I offer you a gift. I'm told you like clams." He held the box over the side of the boat and canceled the shrinking charm. When it was normal size, it was recognizable as an old school trunk and started to sink. "Your clams are in the box." A Stay-Fresh charm like cold boxes had should have kept them edible.

That done, he shrunk all of his things to them put away before casting a wind charm to blow them back to the bank of the lake, although they were moving a lot slower now with five people in the boat.

"Harry, thank you for rescuing me, but what did you just do?" Ginny looked a little put out for being made to wait. The others didn't look so happy to be there either.

"I, uh, I didn't know how to go underwater and couldn't learn the Bubblehead charm in time, so I sort of threatened the Merpeople to get them to bring you up. Only, I didn't expect them to bring everyone up." He shrugged, not sure what else to say.

"You threatened to kill them?" Cho asked as if she couldn't believe what she was hearing.

"Oh no, I only threatened to kill their fish and only killed a few. I saw a Merperson gathering the ones I killed so they weren't wasted. And I left them a trunk of clams, which are supposed to be a delicacy for them," he explained.

"But who is Cedric supposed to rescue?" Cho asked, becoming more upset.

"I'm sorry, I didn't think about them the bringing all of you up. If you like, you can float out in the lake and wait for him," Harry offered.

"No, it's too cold."

"Cold!" the little blonde girl called out in a French accent.

"A warming charm would be very helpful," Ginny added as she started to shiver.

The Durmstrang student nodded his agreement.

"Right, sorry." He stopped the wind charm and put warming charms on the other four, then one on himself too as his previous one was wearing off. Now that everyone was more comfortable, he restarted the wind charm to get them moving again. They would be back in a few more minutes.

"Ginny?" The girl looked up at him. "Why did you volunteer?"

"Because they asked me to do this and," she blushed, "I wanted to help you because I thought it was unfair for you to be in the Tournament."

He considered that and grinned. "You know, this makes twice that I've rescued you." She blushed deeper, which he thought was cute. "I heard you're dating Corner." She looked down and nodded a little. He found it interesting that she wouldn't look at him now. "He's very lucky then." Her head shot up and he could see a world-class blush as well as surprise on her face. Harry enjoyed teasing her for some reason. He considered warning her about Ron, but decided that was a family matter that he shouldn't be involved in.

Turning to look towards the bank, he could see the judges looking his way and they didn't look pleased. That caused him to chuckle.

"Mr Potter," Bagman called out as the boat hit the shore. "What are you doing with all the people? You were only supposed to bring back your person."

Harry got out and lent a hand to Ginny to help her out. She gave him a kiss on the cheek and a quick "Thanks". The others used his hand to steady themselves, but otherwise ignored him. Madam Pomfrey hustled the four over to a tent to be checked.

"Mr Potter," Bagman said again.

"Oh right, sorry. I wasn't trying to rescue all four of them, but the Merpeople misunderstood me when I asked for my person and brought them all instead," he explained.

A screeching noise was heard behind him and he saw a Merperson. Dumbledore walked to the edge of the water and screeched back for a conversation that lasted for nearly two full minutes. When they finished, Dumbledore returned to the group with an upset look on his face.

"The Chief of the Merpeople claims that you threatened to kill them all, Harry."

"I did no such thing," Harry protested. "I may have killed a few fish and threatened to kill a few more, but I was very careful not to do anything that would hurt them directly."

"Harry," Dumbledore said with great disappointment, "threatening their food threatens them. With no food, they'd starve and die."

"There's no way I could kill an entire lake of fish," Harry defended himself. "I just wanted to get their help to get one person since I couldn't do a Bubblehead charm. Besides, I did give them a trunk full of clams, which I'm told they like."

Dumbledore's upset look softened for a moment. "They did thank you for the clams, but they were most upset about the threats, although I believe I've smoothed the incident over." He looked at the other judges. "I believe we need to have a conference."

Harry understood he was dismissed. He left the boat for whomever wanted to use it and went over to see Madam Pomfrey. He would have talked to Ginny, but Corner was there, so he only smiled at her, which she returned without hesitation.

When they returned, each of the other contestants gave him an angry look after they found out what he'd done. Harry just smiled and tried to pretend that everything was all right. He was sorry he had messed them up, but he didn't care what happened to the Tournament itself.

Dumbledore announced the scores to the crowd after all had returned. "Mr Potter rescued all of the people who were underwater. Because he prevented the other contestants from performing their rescue, even though he did rescue his person and return first, we award him five points."

Harry was completely surprised by that. He had returned after only half an hour with his person and he could not think of any rules he had broken in the Tournament rule book Crouch had given him.

"The other contestants will be given full points as if they had rescued their person within the allotted time. The third task will take place at the end of June. You are dismissed until lunch and then classes will resume in the afternoon." Dumbledore cancelled the Sonorus to signal he was done.

"Harry? What was that explosion in the water?"

He turned to see Hermione looking less than pleased. "It was me getting the Merpeople's attention. I promise that I was careful to do it where no one was so no one would get hurt." He shook his head. "Can you believe they only gave me five points? I was the first back and I didn't break a single rule in Crouch's rule book."

"But you prevented the others from finishing the task," she argued.

Harry looked her in the eye. "Even though that was an accident, there's nothing in the rule book that says I can't." He took a deep breath and blew it out in frustration. "I guess it's a good thing I don't care about winning. Let's go. My warming charm is wearing off and I'm tired of having damp feet." He turned and walked back towards the castle. Hermione followed him, still trying to figure out what was going on in Harry's head.

Harry was doodling something random on his parchment. It wasn't something he normally did, but at the moment, it matched his mood. He felt like he wasn't sure what to do. Hermione was working on an essay that wasn't due for two weeks yet, but she hadn't had any ideas for him either when he had asked.

The third chair to their table was pulled out and Ginny dropped herself into it. She didn't look happy, or so Harry thought.

"What's wrong?" asked Hermione, confirming his guess. "I thought you were supposed to be spending some time with Michael this evening."

"Michael is the reason I'm back early; he's being a prat," Ginny said a little viscously, "so I told him he could go be a prat by himself."

No one said anything for a moment, although a grin was trying to break out of Harry. Finally, he couldn't help himself. "Err, Ginny, perhaps I'm not quite seeing the whole picture, but doesn't being a prat require at least two people? Or is he supposed to be a prat to himself?"

Ginny glared at him for a moment, although her corners of her mouth were starting to twitch. A moment later she began to chuckle and then laughed. "Thanks, Harry, I needed that. So, what are you working on? I didn't know you drew."

Harry wondered if she had switched topics purposefully or not, and Hermione's grin didn't really help him decide. "I don't draw normally. I was trying to write a letter to my godfather, but I'm just ... making a mess while I think." He had told her about Sirius and Remus helping him not long ago.

"Oh right, you had that meeting about the third task tonight. What did they tell you?" she asked with genuine curiosity.

"There will be a maze made of shrubs, or hedges, with obstacles inside. The first person to reach the middle wins. I'll enter last because I have the fewest points," he explained.

"What sort of obstacles?" Ginny asked.

"The first thing mentioned were creatures supplied by Hagrid." Ginny paled for a moment. "Yeah, I can already imagine that I'll run into one of those Blast-Ended Skrewts in there. There will probably be spelled or warded areas in there too."

The redhead nodded thoughtfully, regaining her normal color slowly.

Harry looked at both girls. "Is there a 'Point Me' type spell that I could cast on some object that I know is in the middle and it would show me what direction it lies in?"

"That's a good idea to research, Harry," Hermione told him as she reached for something to write the idea on.

"Too bad there isn't," Ginny answered.

"How do you know?" Hermione asked pointedly, as if not liking the answer.

"Because if there was, we magical folk wouldn't lose so many things," Ginny said with a grin. "About the closest you can come would be a Summoning spell, but I would expect them to put an Anti-Summoning charm on whatever you're after."

Harry watched her fling her vibrant red hair back over her shoulders as she made herself comfortable. Hair that looked sort of fire-like. Hmm, he thought, fire can burn plants... He grinned and leaned forward, dipping his quill in the ink so he could start to write.

"You just thought of an idea, didn't you?" Hermione asked.

"Uh-huh." He continued writing.

"Well?" Ginny asked, just as curious as Hermione.

"I think I'll surprise you. After all, it might be a bad idea, but I want to see what Sirius and Remus say."

"Harry," Hermione growled in annoyance.

"Shush, Hermione. This is no different than you getting an idea and running off to the library to research without telling us before you go," he pointed out to her as he dipped his quill again.

Ginny laughed at Hermione's expression of denial. "He is right, you know."

Harry smiled as he continued to write, enjoying the time with the two girls. He didn't miss Ron at all, who still hadn't apologized.

The day of the third task, Harry got to spend most of the day with Remus. Sirius had wanted to come, but he was still officially wanted by the Ministry and couldn't show his face. They had a fun day as

Remus told many stories about the Marauders, normally with no mention of Wormtail. Harry learned a lot about his parents when they were in school.

For the third task, he made sure he had all of his shrunken toys and headed for the Quidditch Arena at the appropriate time. He was surprised to see Ginny sitting next to Hermione and Remus, and when he waved at them, all three waved back.

Ginny had become friendlier with him over the last few months since the end of the second task. She was never a pest or a "fan girl" like some of the other younger girls, but she simply showed up from time to time to talk to him and Hermione. She liked having fun and his favorite activity was to tease her and make her blush, although he had to be prepared for her witty comebacks.

As Harry prepared himself mentally for the last task, Professor Moody came by to check him - after the others - for magical items, finding only his wand as allowed. "Potter, despite your scores, you've done well. Keep your unusual style and you've got a good chance at winning. Remember, the first to the trophy in the center wins."

"Err, right. Thanks professor." Harry considered the old Auror as he walked away. He was a strange one, but the man's class had been enjoyable and Harry and Hermione each thought they had learned a lot. Even Ginny had liked her class with the Defense Professor.

Looking around, Harry saw a lot of people now, from all the students, to the judges, and even Minister Fudge with a few Aurors.

Bagman's amplified voice caught everyone's attention. "It is time for the last and deciding task of this Triwizard Tournament. Each contestant will enter the maze here and the first to reach the trophy in the center wins. The entry order is determined by their points. Therefore, the first in will be Cedric Diggory from Hogwarts." The cheers and applause were loud.

"A minute later, the next to enter will be Fleur Delacour from Beauxbatons." She was applauded, although not as loudly as Cedric.

"Another minute later, Viktor Krum from Durmstrang." More applause.

"And another minute later, the last contestant, Harry Potter." Harry was quite surprised by the amount of applause he received. It was almost as loud as Cedric's.

"Mr Diggory, get ready..." A whistle blew and Diggory took off running to cheers. Harry clapped along with everyone else, as he planned to do for all the champions.

Delacour and Krum each entered at the appropriate time with cheers as well.

While they were going in, Harry pulled out a compass and stuck it to his wrist. Taking a reading, he saw that the center of the maze should be straight east.

When the whistle blew for him, he ran in and turned to the side to get out of sight from the crowd and judges. There, he pulled out a tiny flame-thrower and cancelled the shrinking charm before he strapped it on his back. He had no idea how Sirius had found this, but Harry had requested it when he saw the maze a month ago. He turned the weapon on and flamed the hedge in front of him, quickly creating a large hole. He walked through the hole and into a long corridor that allowed him to go straight for a ways.

Burning through the next hedge, he found full-grown Blast-Ended Skrewt waiting for him, fortunately looking the other way. "Bloody hell!" As the creature tried to turn around to come get him, he quickly pulled out a grenade and enlarged it. He armed and tossed it as fast as he could. Not sure how big the blast radius was, he hastily cast a shield spell. The Skrewt was over the explosive as it went off, throwing blood and gore against his shield. Harry dropped the shield, letting the gore slide to the ground, and saw that the Skrewt wouldn't be a problem for anyone ever again. He hoped Hagrid wasn't too angry with him for this.

Hurrying straight forward, avoiding as much of the mess as he could, Harry burned through two more hedges before he found a Dementor. He quickly pressed the button on the flame-thrower again and lit the Dementor up like a bon fire. When its screaming stopped and it was only a little pile of ash, he realized that had probably been a Boggart. Oh, well.

Three more hedges later, he broke through into a larger area that held a good-sized Acromantula. Ron, who still hadn't apologized to him, would have been freaking out about now. Harry just squeezed the trigger. The spider howled from the flames as it ran off, leaving the area.

Looking forward, Harry could see the cup-shaped trophy. He sprinted to it as fast as his burden would let him and started to grab it, but some intuition stopped him. He remembered the spell the judges had used to detect magic, and in fact, he'd even tried it and made it work once. Just to be safe, he cast the revealing spell on the trophy and the cup lit up like a Christmas tree. He considered what to do while the glow faded.

With a smirk, he held up his wand and cast the Red Sparks charm. He took three steps back to make sure he didn't do something stupid like trip and accidentally touch the trophy cup. To keep his surprises, he shrunk his flame thrower back down and put it away, waiting with only his wand out.

Half a minute later, Professor McGonagall appeared with wand drawn after a faint crack. She looked around and seeing only him and the trophy, lowered her wand. "What is the problem, Potter? You've found the trophy; grab it and end the contest."

"Professor, there's magic all over the trophy, how do I know it's safe to touch?"

She walked over. "Of course there's magic on it. It's supposed to take you back to the entrance when you pick it up."

"So it's a Portkey?"

"Yes. The Headmaster changed the ward at only this location to allow it to work. Now grab the trophy and end this."

He thought she muttered something else, but he didn't catch it. Back to the trophy, there was still something tickling the back of his mind saying not to touch the cup. The very same feeling he had last year when they were in the Shrieking Shack with Pettigrew and the man got away. Perhaps...

"Very well, Professor. Want to come over and touch it too so you can get a ride back?"

"I can go directly by Apparating, Potter."

He gave her his best pleading look. "Please, Professor? It would make me feel better, considering everything else that's gone wrong with the Tournament."

She studied him for a moment before she sighed and stepped forward. "If it will hurry this up, I will. As I say the word 'three', grab the other handle."

"Right, on three."

They both stood near the trophy and McGonagall counted out loud. "One ... Two ... Three." Both of their hands moved, but at the last second, Harry pulled his in slightly so it would go wide. McGonagall's hand touched the trophy and she disappeared along with it.

With a smile on his face, Harry pulled out his flame thrower, enlarged it, and strapped it on his back as he started heading west. Most of the holes he'd created in the hedges were getting smaller as they repaired themselves. Harry made them large again and walked out with barely a pause.

A few minutes later, Harry arrived at the entrance and Moody was there to greet him, only Harry didn't see him at first and let off one last shot of flame to get through the last hedge. Some gel that the flame burned landed on Moody's wooden leg causing it to start burning. Moody danced around while trying to put out the flame.

Harry noticed that Moody had dropped his flask. He had always wondered what was in it - some sort of alcoholic drink he assumed. Putting his flame thrower away, he grabbed the flask. Opening it, he took a whiff and almost gagged. "Eww, gross! Why do you keep rotting cabbages in your flask?" As he said it, a memory from second year hit him, as did stares from every adult around, who had noticed him along with the flaming Professor. "Polyjuice?" he asked the adults.

Moody threw a blasting spell at the ground to kick up a lot of dirt and started running as fast as his charred peg-leg would take him towards the maze. Despite a hasty shield, the man never had a chance with so many spells cast at him. Fortunately, they were all Stunning or Body-Bind spells, causing him to fall in a tangle of limbs.

Dumbledore tied him up after checking him for Portkeys. "We shall just have to wait to see who this is." He then turned around. "Harry, what are you doing here instead of in the maze? Were you the one to send up the sparks?"

Harry saw his three supporters come running up and he grinned at them before answering. "Oh, I reached the center and did a revealing spell on the trophy and found it covered in magic. I didn't want to touch it, so I sent up the sparks and then convinced Professor McGonagall to touch it. Isn't she back here yet? She said it would take someone back here in front of everyone."

The judges all looked worried.

"She hasn't returned," Dumbledore said with concern, looking around for his Deputy like everyone else, causing Harry to feel justified in his trickery.

"Look, he's changing!" Hermione pointed to the fake Moody. Everyone watched the man change from old to young, and for Moody's prosthetics to fall off as they were no longer needed.

"Barty Crouch the son," Dumbledore said gravely. "Now we know why the father has gone missing."

"No!" shouted Percy Weasley, who had come to fill in for Barty Crouch the elder, his manager.

"But he was sent to Azkaban and died!" Minister Fudge looked appalled.

"We seem to have evidence to the contrary," Dumbledore replied.

"Aurors! Bring a Dementor!" cried Fudge.

"Wait! We need to question him first," Dumbledore implored. "He may know where Minerva has gone."

"Fine, question him, but I want a Dementor nearby in case he tries to escape again," Fudge said firmly.

"Severus," Dumbledore called his Potions Professor over. "Get some Veritaserum - quickly." The Potions Master hurried back to the castle.

Harry thought it was the only time he'd ever seen the man go faster than his normal walking speed.

"Did you have any trouble inside?" he heard near his left ear.

Turning, Harry saw his three friends there. Remus had asked the question. "No, almost none at all. Everything went well."

"Harry, what did you kill this time? I heard an explosion and screams." Hermione glared at him to force him to answer. Ginny looked curious but not upset.

"Uh, let's see. The explosion removed one of the Blast-Ended Skrewts..."

"Good riddance," Ginny interjected.

Hermione frowned, but didn't object. "I heard some screams."

"Right, the first of those was, I think, a Boggart."

"Harry, you can't kill a Boggart," Remus told him. "You can only banish them."

"Actually, they turn into a little pile of ash if you set them on fire."

Remus opened his mouth in surprise and then closed it. "Ingenious," he finally said.

Hermione was shaking her head. "And the last?"

"I might not have killed it, but I did set a good-sized Acromantula on fire."

"Those are sentient, Harry," she complained with another glare.

"It was trying to kill me, Hermione," he returned back in the same forceful tone.

"I say good riddance to that too," Ginny said.

"Thank you."

"You're welcome, Harry," the redhead said with a grin.

Everyone felt a chill approach. Turning, they all saw a real Dementor standing about twenty yards away. It was wearing a medallion around its cloaked neck, which is what Harry assumed allowed it to be controlled near a group of people like this. He wondered where they had found one so quickly; they must have had one nearby for some reason.

Ginny let out a sound that sounded like a soft whimper. Understanding what was happening, since he didn't feel so good right now either, Harry moved over and stood between her and Dementor. He felt her hand on his shoulder and heard a soft, "Thank you."

A sudden crack filled the air off to the side, causing everyone to look that way. There they saw Minerva McGonagall kneeling on one knee, touching the trophy and holding on to a bundle that looked like a bound man with a baby carrier tied to him.

Dumbledore rushed over. Harry moved that way as well, since it was a little further away from the Dementor and he really wanted to know what was going on. His redheaded shadow moved with him, as did his other two friends.

As he got close, his scar suddenly flared in pain much like it had in his first year at Hogwarts, causing him to stumble. Ginny and Hermione each grabbed an arm to steady him.

"What's wrong, Harry?" Hermione asked.

"My scar," he whispered, trying to recover without any of the adults seeing him like this. A glance showed Remus looking angrily at the man on the ground.

Dumbledore helped his Deputy to her feet. "Minerva, what happened?"

Fudge looked very interested too, as did everyone else gathered around.

McGonagall straightened her robes to look more her normal self. "Mr Potter lured me to the center with his sparks and then tricked me into grabbing the trophy without him."

They all looked at Harry, who thought he had his normal expression again. "What? I told you I did the magic revealing spell and the trophy was covered in magic. I wasn't going to touch it when it was like that."

Dumbledore sighed. "Harry, it was a Portkey to bring you back to the entrance so we could see who the winner was."

"But you didn't tell any of us that, did you?" he asked a little belligerently. "I've had enough bad things happen to me that I wasn't going to take the chance, and I can see that was a good decision." He pointed down. "See, you found Pettigrew, who betrayed my family."

"That's Peter Pettigrew?" the Minister asked, incredulous at even the possibility.

"Yes," Harry confirmed, "he's the one we told you about last year."

"But he's been dead for years!" Fudge argued.

"No, he just tricked everyone," Harry argued back. He looked at his head of house. "Professor McGonagall, you taught him and he was in your house. Is that Peter Pettigrew?"

She cleared her throat. "I'm sorry to have to say it is. A traitor in Gryffindor."

"I recognize him as well," Dumbledore added. "Please continue, Minerva."

"Yes, of course. The trophy was Portkey, but instead of bringing me here, it took me to a graveyard. There, Pettigrew and the, the thing,

he was carrying came to me and tried to stun me. Fortunately, Pettigrew was never a good fighter, so it was easy it stun them both. I assumed someone had laid another Portkey spell over the first one, so I used the trophy to get back, bringing them with me."

Harry pulled his wand out and cast a mild cutting charm at the ropes binding the prisoners before anyone could stop him. He pulled Pettigrew's left arm up and pushed down the sleeve. There for all to see was a Dark Mark. It was a light gray, but there was no doubt it was Voldemort's Mark.

"Minister," Harry pulled the arm up high so the man could clearly see. "I believe this explains who the guilty party was between him and Sirius Black. He probably threw a Confundus Charm on everyone there before he escaped, pushing the blame on Black. Will you call off the search for Black, and since he never had a trial, declare him not guilty."

"Well, I uh, hmm..." Fudge sounded as indecisive as he looked.

"Minister, this is a Death Eater. He betrayed my parents by telling ..." Harry had to bite his tongue on what he had been about to say, so as not to lose what advantage he had so far. "He told You-Know-Who where we were hiding so that my parents were killed, then he killed the twelve Muggles in London because that's what Death Eaters do, before he faked his death to blame Black. He's a Death Eater and he's guilty," Harry proclaimed loudly as he threw Pettigrew's arm down in disgust.

Fudge was nodding now. "Yes, I can see how he must have fooled the Aurors at the time, as well as Crouch and Minister Bagnold." He was careful not to include himself. "Very well, Mr Potter, I'll declare Black not guilty, correcting a mistake from the previous administration."

"Thank you, Minister," Harry said magnanimously, even though he felt a little sickened by having to deal with the politician, especially after the man had denied Black his freedom last year. As he looked around and saw smiles on his friends, he realized he had another special opportunity.

"Minister, would you say this ... thing, as Professor McGonagall called it, is just some strange creature, probably even evil since a

Death Eater had it?" Harry picked up the bundle and looked at it. "Ghaa, it's ugly!" It looked something like a cross between a human baby and a snake.

Fudge took one very brief look before jerking his head back. "Definitely not human, whatever it is."

"So we should get rid of it, right, Minister?"

"Just a moment, Harry..." Dumbledore started, before being interrupted.

"Definitely," Fudge confirmed, flicking his hand as if brushing it away.

"Yeah, I thought so too." Before anyone could stop him, Harry took two steps, twisting around quickly as he did and letting the "thing" swing out. As he completed a half turn, he let go of the "thing", flinging it hard.

Everyone watched it sail through the air, some with horror, as it headed right for the Dementor. As it neared the Dark creature, the Dementor took one step forward and reached out its cloak-covered hands, or maybe claws, and caught the "thing". Before anyone could stop it, it raised the bundle to where its head should be. Because of the Dementor's cloak in back and the bundle in front, no one could see exactly what it was doing, but to all who knew what Dementors did, there was no doubt it was performing the Kiss. In what seemed like only a few seconds, the Dementor dropped the bundle and stood still again. The "thing" fell and didn't make a sound or move when it hit the ground.

Harry broke the silence when he turned to Fudge and said, "Well, that's taken care of. Will I read about Sirius Black being free in the newspaper tomorrow morning, Minister?"

The Minister swallowed hard after what he had just seen and slowly nodded.

"Spectacular. Well, I'll leave Pettigrew with the Aurors then. Oh, be sure you keep him stunned. He is an unregistered rat Animagus. That was how he escaped last time." Harry started to leave and then stopped. "Oh, and be sure to question him to find out who the other Death Eaters are. I'm sure it would be good to have them arrested

too." Fudge slowly nodded again. Harry wasn't sure Fudge would really do that last part when he regained his senses, but he might as well plant the idea and hope it worked.

"Mr Potter, you forgot something," McGonagall said, pushing an object towards him.

Without thinking, Harry grabbed the item and magical trumpets went off and the hedge maze started to slowly dissolve. He looked at McGonagall with disbelief, but she just stood there, looking at him with a very superior look.

"Oh, yes," said a startled Fudge, "we must award the winner." He pulled out a mokeskin bag and handed it Harry. "Congratulations, Mr Potter. Not only are you the winner this year, but I believe you are the youngest winner ever." He looked around. "Weatherby, that is what you said, wasn't it? He'd be the youngest winner if he won?"

A blushing Percy Weasley nodded. "Yes, Mr Minister."

It took some minutes more to bring the other champions out of the maze, take pictures, and otherwise wrap-up the Triwizard Tournament. Remus was still eyeing his former friend, hand twitching as if wanting to grab his wand.

As Harry started to leave, Dumbledore stopped him with a hand on his shoulder and a quiet word. "Harry ... there is something we must talk about."

Somehow he knew this was a conversation he never wanted to have. He didn't know how he knew it, as he was also sure he didn't have an "inner eye", but he knew this conversation could be a bad thing. "I'm sorry, Professor, but I'm done with it all."

"Harry..." the old man said softly.

"Professor, I know what I just did ... who that was. I've saved them all twice - defeated him twice!" Harry hissed the last part adamantly before he restored some calm. "I'm done, no more. If there's to be a third time, someone else can do it. I'm tired of being Fate's whipping boy. I'm going to be normal from now on and that starts with going to live with my godfather this summer."

"Harry..."

"No, Professor. I will not go live with people who hate me anymore. You are not my guardian. Normalcy begins now." He glanced at his friends and saw Hermione looking quizzically at him, while Ginny was beaming her agreement. "Actually, living with my godfather will be second; I think a girlfriend will be first."

He looked at Hermione. "While I didn't formally promise, I think I should give you first choice. Have your feelings for me changed?"

Hermione blinked slowly, as if trying to figure it out, before a look of comprehension and a light blush came over her. "I, uh ... thank you, Harry; that means a lot to me. However, I don't think my feelings have changed. I love you, but you're kind of the brother I never had growing up."

Harry couldn't help the smile and leaned over and gave her a light hug. "I suppose I feel the same way ... sister. Well, if you're not to be the girlfriend..." he started to look around and immediately saw Ginny, who was looking embarrassedly hopeful. "Ginny?"

As she started to reply, a male voice shouted. "Wait a minute, Potter; she's my girlfriend."

Ginny's blush darkened with anger as she turned to face the boy. "Corner! Shut it!"

Several people "ooh'd" at her using his surname.

"But Ginny..."

"Corner? Who ignored me when I asked him to sit with me tonight? Who said he'd rather sit with his friends? Sounds like we've already broken up to me, it just wasn't official." She glared at the Ravenclaw boy.

"Well who wouldn't spend time with me when I asked her to last week?" Corner fired back.

"You mean the boy who couldn't get to know me outside of the broom closets before trying to get me inside one and not

understanding the inside of a person is more important than the outside?" she shot back with hands on hips.

"Huh?" Corner looked at his friends to see if they understood that.

"Seems perfectly reasonable to take things slowly and get to know each other as persons before ..." Harry blushed as he paused, then hurriedly finished with, "before broom closets."

Ginny nodded once quickly. "See, he gets it. And you call yourself a Ravenclaw?"

"How am I supposed to understand girls?" Corner asked incredulously.

She shook her head in pity. "Not with me. It's over; go find someone else." Ginny turned to Harry and smiled. "If the position of your girlfriend is still open, I'm interested."

He smiled and started chuckling. "The position is yours, Ginny." As he put his arm around her shoulders to walk her back to the castle, Snape strode past them with a sneer before continuing on to where the Headmaster and Minister were.

They hadn't taken more than three steps when a voice drawled, "Congratulations, Weaslette. Not only did you get the winner, but you got his gold too." The blond Slytherin gave her a cruel laugh, as if to congratulate himself at his own cleverness.

Ginny stopped Harry even with Draco Malfoy on left side, but she looked at her new boyfriend. "Harry, can I borrow that bag of gold? I'll give it right back in a moment."

"See, she already taking your gold, Potty," Malfoy taunted again.

Not knowing what she wanted it for, but trusting her, Harry dug out the fist-sized mokeskin bag that was slightly heavy and handed it to her, while scowling at the Slytherin and wondering what he could get away with.

Everyone watched her undo the cord around the throat of the bag that was a large bow and wrapped around a few times, pulling the cord completely loose. When she was done, the cord was about

eighteen inches long and the bag dangled by it. Then with surprising speed, she whipped the bag around in front of her clockwise, it going up and then coming around full circle. Ginny turned left and moved as the bag started to come up, extending her arm so the heavy bag hit its target with a squish sound as it twirled upward. Malfoy's hands instinctively moved to cover his crotch, even if it was too late to help. His surprised look was frozen on his face as he slowly slide to his knees and fell over on his side.

Harry winced sympathetically, even if it was Malfoy, as did all the other boys who saw what had happened. It was just a guy thing. He quickly looked around and realized that all the adults were gathered around the Minister and Headmaster, and had not seen what Ginny had done.

Ginny grabbed the bag of gold and rewrapped it, tying it off in a large bow again, before smiling sweetly as she handed it back to Harry. "Thanks!" she said brightly. She turned to Malfoy and bent over slightly and hissed, "Don't you ever call me a whore again or I'll be even more unpleasant about it!"

She moved back over and put her arm around Harry's waist, looking completely normal. "Now, where were we before we were so rudely interrupted?"

Harry unconsciously put his arm back across her shoulders and started walking her towards the castle again, with people hastily clearing a path in front of them. He cleared his throat noisily. "I'm not sure we had a subject yet."

They passed Ron, who glared at them, but wisely didn't say anything. Her twin brothers were laughing themselves silly.

"Perhaps we could discuss you coming over to visit this summer. Sirius has a Floo connection so it would be easy," he offered.

"I'd like that," she agreed. "You could come over to The Burrow. I know Mum would love to see you."

"I'm sure that would be great, but I'm also sure Ron would cause problems."

She chuckled. "I doubt it. He'll apologize to you soon I'm sure."

He gave her a look of disbelieve. "Why? Are you going to make him?"

Ginny chuckled harder. "No ... well, not directly. Once Mum finds out what he did and said to you, I would expect him to be motivated to apologize."

Now Harry chuckled as he realized what she meant. "So, tell me more about yourself, Ginny..."

(the end)

(A/N: You can bet that Dumbledore was planning how to make that Dementor be the best guarded one ever until it needed to be destroyed. Dumbledore would have time to go find all the Horcruxes without pressure, and Voldemort would finally die when Harry died of old age (or something along those lines). There would also be no reason for Umbridge next year, and Harry and Ginny would never have to break up because of a war.

So, that's the rabid plot bunny that bit me; I hope you enjoyed it. Thanks again to Wolfs_Scream for his help. - Kevin)